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*Evaluation Brief: CGIAR Research Program
on Forests Trees, and Agroforestry*

Submitted by:
Independent Evaluation Arrangement

EVALUATION BRIEF

CGIAR Research Program on Forests Trees, and Agroforestry

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Background

The CGIAR Research Program “Forests, Trees and Agroforestry: Livelihoods, Landscapes and Governance” (FTA) aims to enhance the management and use of forests, agroforestry and tree genetic resources across the landscape, from forests to farms and plantations. FTA brings together four CGIAR research centers (CIFOR, ICRAF, Bioversity International, and CIAT) in partnership with two non-CGIAR Participant Institutions (CIRAD and CATIE)¹.

Led by CIFOR, FTA was approved by the CGIAR Fund Council in April 2011, and is a ten-year multi-partner program to be implemented within the CGIAR Strategy and Results Framework (SRF). The first phase of FTA covered the period from July 2011 through June 2014 with an initial USD 233 million three-year budget that includes a USD 90 million contribution from the CGIAR’s programmatic funding windows 1 and 2. This evaluation covers the period from program start, in July 2011, to end of 2013 and its main inquiry phase took place from October 2013 to February 2014.

The principal purpose of the evaluation is to enhance the contribution that FTA is likely to make to reaching CGIAR goals and to solving evolving global, regional and national forestry and agroforestry-related challenges. A secondary purpose is to help the CGIAR Consortium Board and Office and the CGIAR Fund Council in building a body of experience on the suitability of structures, and governance and management arrangements of CGIAR Research Programs.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation was both summative and formative in nature: it reviewed progress made towards results, and gender mainstreaming, governance and partnership aspects; and included a strong forward-looking component analyzing FTA’s likelihood for generating future outcomes and impacts. The results of the evaluation provide inputs to the revision of the CGIAR Research Program CRP strategy, including suggestions for a more efficient and effective organization of the work carried out under the CRP.

FTA was reviewed according to the CGIAR Evaluation Policy and Evaluation Standards covering the criteria of: Relevance, Quality of Science, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact, and Sustainability. During the inception phase of the evaluation, key overarching evaluation questions were developed that formed the basis of the methodology and approach: (1) How coherent and relevant are FTA objectives?; (2) What is the comparative advantage of FTA?; (3) Is FTA research of high quality?; (4) Is FTA likely to deliver its intended results?; (5) Are FTA cross-cutting and support activities relevant and effective?; and (6) Are FTA institutional arrangements effective and efficient?

The evaluation was conducted by a core team of five evaluators and one analyst, and drew its primary information and data from CRP documents; project and financial databases; interviews; group discussions; project site visits; expert knowledge; and online surveys.

Key Findings and Conclusions

FTA Objectives and Research Agenda

The evaluation found that FTA’s overall objectives are highly relevant. It found a strong demand for a program like FTA, focusing on research to address the inter-related research questions around forests,

¹ FTA Centers are: CIFOR: Center for International Forestry Research; ICRAF: World Agroforestry Center; Bioversity International; CIAT: International Center for Tropical Agriculture; CATIE: Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza; and CIRAD La recherche agronomique pour le développement

trees and agroforestry. This type of research requires a holistic, integrated approach and a broad range of expertise that goes beyond what any single FTA Participant Institution can provide in isolation. Geographically, it found that FTA works largely in relevant areas, with research focusing on biodiversity hotspots, areas under deforestation and degradation threats and with ongoing deforestation and degradation, and also on the most impoverished regions of the world. FTA Centers were also found to be seen as global leaders in key scientific domains of FTA research. The most important comparative advantage applying to all the FTA Centers is that they are regarded as neutral world-class scientific research organizations that do not advocate specific agendas.

The evaluation found that FTA's objectives and its research agenda are aligned with the CGIAR SRF vision, relevant Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as with objectives of related global agreements and programs. FTA objectives were also found to clearly cater to the overall objectives the CGIAR has set itself, the common Intermediary Development Outcomes (IDOs) and the CGIAR systems' four System-Level Outcomes (SLOs).

FTA project portfolio

FTA was found to be strong in addressing directly forest-related challenges but weaker in dealing with extra-sectoral issues. Some core areas of sustainable forest management dealing with resource assessment, silvicultural methods, harvesting and planted forest development, did not appear to receive sufficient attention. The evaluation highlighted the importance of this issue as there is demand for this type of research and an opportunity for FTA to increase its present level of activity.

The evaluation found that while projects usually delivered (or were likely to deliver) outcomes in their direct control, performance in terms of contributing to outcomes at scale (and beyond their direct control) were less satisfactory. It also found that a large part of the FTA research portfolio consisted of individual and often unrelated projects, with new project proposals frequently not being integrated into FTA's results framework. Overall, FTA's research portfolio did not yet demonstrate strong synergies between projects and exhibited inadequate collective alignment towards FTA objectives. FTA's theory of change appeared under-developed. The results framework - while very detailed in parts - appeared constructed bottom-up instead of top-down and lacked aggregated indicators.

FTA's Sentinel Landscapes concept was found to have high relevance and to hold great promise to produce much-needed, comparable long-term datasets of socioeconomic and biophysical changes along the forest transition curve. However, the integration of Sentinel Landscapes with other research appeared to be challenging. The Evaluation Team was particularly concerned that the needed donor support for Sentinel Landscapes has not yet materialized.

The Evaluation Team also identified several challenges related to data management across FTA Centers, with the continued lack of harmonized data management and reporting standards across Centers found to be an issue of concern. It also found that the research portfolio exhibited incomplete Gender coverage, and found that the Gender strategy did not sufficiently cover social diversity, nor provided sufficient advice on how to assess and deal with limited scalability of approaches to Gender.

Results at Scale and Partnerships

In terms of contributing to large scale development outcomes, the Evaluation Team could often not identify a convincing rationale for how pilot-scale achievements aiming at adoption of technologies would drive further up- or out-scaling, and found too much reliance on the assumption that well-documented and widely disseminated case studies or research results would, by themselves, become effective drivers of replication, adoption, and further applied research. For pathways aiming to influence national and international policy, the Evaluation Team was concerned that international and regional institutions of strategic importance for FTA would not always consider FTA research to be of

relevance for their work.

Overall, FTA needs to further strengthen its outreach to, and inclusion of, project boundary partners and, especially, to large development organizations towards ensuring relevance of FTA research from the perspectives of these partners.

Finance, Governance and Management

FTA has shown considerable spending performance in view of sometimes uncertain and delayed disbursements of Window 1 and 2 program funds. However, more long-term predictability and reliability of funding is required to increase FTA's planning horizon.

In terms of governance and management, the Evaluation Team found that the FTA Director's mandate was too weak. Another issue of particular concern was the apparently limited ability of FTA's Steering Committee to establish strategic research priorities and to allocate fund accordingly across FTA Participant Institutions. Overall, the mandates of the FTA Director and the Steering Committee should be considerably strengthened. The Steering Committees terms of reference should, for example, explicitly include strategic priority setting and resource allocation.

On the level of the CGIAR system, the Consortium Board and Office have driven the development of a system for performance-based allocation of resources that is intended to be applied to FTA for its second phase, starting in 2017. The Evaluation Team was concerned about the lack of realism in those plans and finds that key issues remained unresolved such as i) difficulties of attributing research activities to development outcomes, ii) the available resources, time and methodology for monitoring results, iii) the lack of reliable methodology to compare the value for money across very different types of results, and iv) the considerable time-lags between activities and results.

More importantly, the Evaluation Team found that a trust-based relationship between FTA Centers, their partners, and the Consortium Office and Board are ingredients of critical importance for the future success of FTA. To the Evaluation Team it was evident that the realization of a results-driven programmatic approach for FTA critically hinges on cooperation and collaboration between the Consortium Board and Office on the one hand, and FTA Participant Institutions on the other. Better, and more, collaboration is required, without which success in establishing any of the key requirements listed in evaluation recommendations seem unlikely.

Evaluation Recommendations

1. FTA's program and component-level objectives continue to be pursued programmatically because of their high global relevance. Several adjustments must be made to address emerging research themes, ensure better integration of forestry issues into the broader development agendas, and better balance current research priorities geographically.
2. Better balance research priorities thematically, to adjust component coverage accordingly, and to establish "tenure" as a cross-cutting activity.
3. All FTA Participant Institutions safeguard their principal comparative advantage of being neutral, world class research institutions and resist pressures to work outside their areas of comparative advantage. CIFOR and ICRAF must further intensify their already close collaboration to maximize synergies and minimize unnecessary competition.
4. FTA further develops its results framework and impact pathways into a comprehensive theory of change and a framework for results-based management that explicitly acknowledges windows for opportunistic and blue-sky research. Based on this framework, FTA must then initiate active management of its entire research portfolio, including increased selectivity with

regard to mapping bilaterally funded projects to the program.

5. As part of the preparations for FTA's second phase proposal, the FTA Steering Committee re-assesses the relevance and the financial sustainability of the current set of Sentinel Landscapes and adapt the entire approach to Sentinel Landscapes in the FTA Phase II Proposal accordingly.
6. Updating the FTA Gender strategy to better cover social diversity, scalability of findings, and earlier lessons learned. The FTA Steering Committee must monitor the degree to which gender-sensitive research is mainstreamed in FTA and take corrective action if Gender mainstreaming remains stagnant by year-end 2015.
7. FTA increases and makes more systematic efforts to reach out to and involve partners on all levels: program donors, relevant actors of strategic importance for FTA, and boundary partners. FTA must further increase its efforts to include boundary partners into research priority setting, design, and implementation, develop their capacity, and ensure that FTA results targets respond to concrete needs of development partners.
8. The Fund Council and the Consortium Office improve the predictability, reliability and timely disbursement of Window 1 and 2 resources to FTA and urge CGIAR members to provide full cost recovery when acting as bilateral donors.
9. The quality and coherence of FTA data management be improved.
10. Strengthening and clarifying the mandate and the independent voice of the FTA Steering Committee, and to connect it better to the Consortium Board and Office.
11. The Director's mandate and independence, and FTA's overall line management reporting, needs to be strengthened.
12. The Fund Council, the Consortium Board and Office, the FTA Lead Center and FTA Participating Institutions work together to ensure a multi-year period of stable operations during which confidence and trust is built, the recommendations of this report are implemented, and important requirements for FTA's future success are put in place.

Management Response

CRP FTA management was overall pleased with the results of the evaluation and congratulated the Evaluation Team and IEA management for their professionalism, transparency and willingness to dialogue. It added that the evaluation was a very comprehensive and constructive analysis of the strength and weaknesses of FTA which recognized the high relevance of FTA work and the need to continue FTA as a program.

In the CRP Management Response, FTA listed a number of short and long terms actions being taken to address the evaluation findings and recommendations. In terms of specific recommendations, FTA management fully agreed with 10 out of the 12 recommendations, and partially agreed with the two remaining. For the recommendation on Gender (Recommendation 6), FTA partially agreed with the diagnosis, but offered in the management response long term changes and future developments to better address this area.

In regards to the recommendation on management (Recommendation 11); CRP Management of FTA agreed overall with the recommendation, but offered an alternative solution to strengthen and reinforce both the CRP Director's role and that of the FTA Steering Committee. CRP Management of FTA subsequently revised the TORs for the FTA Director in light of, and consistent with, the recommendation, and created an extended FTA Management Committee (with revised TORs) to include the FTA Director, Flagship Leaders and Cross-cutting Theme Coordinators.